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Kent State Revisited-Twenty-Five Years Later

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May 4, 1995 was the 25th anniversary of the tragic shooting of students at Ohio's Kent State University. In this article, a student personnel administrator serving as a Resident Director during that period and an eyewitness to the events, reflects on the circumstances surrounding the unfortunate incident and what meaning it might have for higher education during the current era.

The Democratic National Convention in Chicago, June 1968, sent notice to the nation that a significant number of young people were opposed to the United States involvement in Vietnam and were prepared to confront that commitment in an organized and aggressive manner. The deaths of Robert Kennedy and Dr. Martin Luther King had exacerbated a feeling of frustration and fueled the flames of resolve and resistance.

With assassination, war, politics, counter cultures, and human rights active topics of debate and reflection, college campuses from Berkley to Columbia were in the midst of a cathartic experience far removed from the tranquility of the past decade. A most unlikely institution for disruption and dissent was in a small town in Northeast Ohio. Founded as a normal school to prepare teachers for public schools, Kent State had developed like numerous institutions that made the transition from state teachers college to comprehensive university. By the fall of 1969, Kent State had vestiges of a major research university while retaining an ambiance similar to the numerous private colleges which doted the landscape of Northeast Ohio.

Fraternities and sororities were alive and well in September, 1969. Football was more than a passing interest and the “strip” on Water Street drew large contingents of young people to local watering holes each weekend. On campus, frivolity often reigned during the week as hedonistic young people engaged in panty raids and epic battles between rival dormitories. There was even an "animal corridor" which made the fraternity activities of a future film appear to be civil by comparison.

This was the university which was to become a focal point for student activism, a rallying cry for campus radicals across the country. This was the campus depicted as a bastion of descent by certain novelists and political commentators after the tragic shooting in May, 1970, when in fact, it was a typical academic institution to be found in conservative mid-America.

In the days preceding May 4, 1970, a series of incidents occurred which could have easily transcended into far different outcomes. On Friday, May 1, the Kent community learned of the United States incursion into neutral Cambodia, an event viewed by students as an escalation of the war effort. Even though Kent State had not been a particularly political campus up to this point, the event was received with significant concern by the average student. As apolitical as most students were at the University and despite their proclivity for frivolous behavior, there still existed a concern for national events, if only in a tertiary way.

The mood of the average Kent State student was that of cautious concern mixed with a splash of anger and frustration at a government which was perceived as hypocritical (President Nixon had campaigned on a peace platform) and a generation of parents who found it difficult to understand the music, morality, and modus operandi of its offspring. As many students marched off to the local bar scene Friday evening, the atmosphere was not unlike that of hundreds of college towns throughout the United States.

Early in the evening around 9:00 p.m., a local motorcycle gang from nearby Brady Lake, Ohio, rode into town and stationed themselves at the corner of Main and Water Streets. Looking for attention from the college clientele and local authorities and not receiving any satisfaction on this evening, gang members rolled a city trash container into the middle of the intersection and set it afire. What followed was one of the critical mistakes which led to the death of four students and fueled the flames of the anti-war movement for the next four years.

The local authorities, although quite experienced in dealing with the problems associated with a "college town," decided to order all local taverns to stop serving alcoholic beverages and close by midnight. Thus, instead of having a few individuals and curious onlookers to deal with, by 12:05 a.m. there were hundreds of angry students and visitors thrust into the streets creating a mob-like atmosphere. Upset by the abrupt end to a socially active Friday night and frustrated over national politics, select individuals in the newly created mob threw rocks at store windows as the crowd was pushed by local police toward the Kent State campus.

The result of this bizarre incident was even more unpredictable than the police order to close the "strip." Local merchants insisted on "protection" from the "radicals" and "undesirables" which were now perceived to be predominant in the student body. Through the local authorities, the Ohio Governor was apprised of the crisis at Kent State and politicians began to perceive the events as an opportunity to show resolve and to demonstrate that Governor Rhodes could maintain order throughout the state university system.

The move to "maintain order" gained momentum the next day and concluded Saturday evening. Provocative statements through the local print and electronic media about the radicalization of the campus caused a quiet nervousness and excitement throughout the residence halls. The large bell at one end of the campus "Common" called out the students who had remained on campus for the weekend.

Sitting at the top of a hill in a wooded area looking down on the Commons, it was easy to witness an odd but unfortunate scene. Approximately a dozen individuals, most likely a portion of the small contingent of campus radicals, were attempting to set fire to a World War II barracks which was used by the Kent State Reserve Officer Training Corps. It was a strange sight to behold since it took approximately 45 minutes for the small, wood structure to become engulfed in flames while a group of campus security officers curiously looked on. The burning of the ROTC building was more symbolic than catastrophic and yet it was clear from that moment on that the Ohio National Guard would be sent to "occupy" the campus and protect the town and University from the anarchists which resided therein.

Early on Sunday morning, May 3, the National Guard entered the campus gates of Kent State University. It was a paradoxical moment as coeds placed flowers in the M-1 rifles carried by the "weekend warriors" while resentment began to grow that the establishment had

transformed this quiet, rural campus into an armed camp. Armed personnel carriers plodded along while popular songs blasted from nearby dormitory windows. Soldiers laughed and joked as students seemed to reluctantly accept their intrusion.

With marshal law established by Governor Rhodes in Kent, Ohio, and thousands of students returning to campus for Monday classes, it seemed inevitable that a crisis was about to develop. Certainly, the existence of the United States Army on campus would lead significant numbers of students to question the tactics being used by the "establishment." In the midst of this chaotic situation, there was an almost total absence of leadership from the administration of the University and little internal communication. The circumstances were ripe for "alternate" leadership to develop and this phenomenon matured quickly during Sunday afternoon and early evening.

As dusk approached the Kent State campus on Sunday evening, students were called by dissident leaders to assemble in the Commons for a peaceful gathering to discuss the presence of the National Guard. Since marshal law had been declared, Guard officers ordered that the crowd be dispersed. For the next several hours the campus remotely resembled the Soviet police action in Budapest, Hungary, in 1956, soldiers in riot gear marching against protesters in a hapless effort to quell resistance. Students who had come to Kent State from largely rural communities and small towns in Northeastern Ohio felt real fear for the first time as tear gas pierced their lungs and brought tears gushing from their eyes. In one unforgettable series of events, hundreds of students swept through a dormitory (Dunbar Hall) from the southside while residents witnessed guardsmen thrusting bayonets through the lounge windows on the northside.

Sunday evening came to an end with more bruised egos than serious injuries and yet there was an underlying feeling that something strange, unfortunate, even tragic, was about to take place. Rumors had begun to spread through the student body that the Governor and the Guard meant business and would enforce their will even more emphatically the next day. National Guardsmen heard or were told that students had weapons and their lives were in danger. It was in this atmosphere of fear and paranoia that the third tragic decision was made at Kent, Ohio.

From Sunday afternoon to Monday morning the Kent State Campus increased from 1500 resident students to 8500, and commuters, faculty and staff swelled the total population to over

25,000. Crowd control would obviously be more difficult if not impossible given the proliferation of people. On the morning of May 4, 1970, classes began on schedule as Guardsmen were issued "live" rounds to assist them in maintaining order and enforcing martial law.

As the bell in the Commons sounded at noon on May 4, there was an eerie feeling that somehow catastrophic events had preceded sound judgement and reason. Demonstration leaders, campus radicals, even perhaps some outside troublemakers called the campus together at its most recognizable center, the Commons, which was adjacent to several dormitories and the Architecture Building and, in turn, looked down on an idle soccer field and parking lot.

As a large crowd gathered in response to the sound of the bell, the National Guard began to prepare to carry out its mission, to prevent any gathering or meeting of more than five people. As the Guard marched on the crowd of approximately 1000 demonstrators and onlookers, a scene similar to the previous evening began to unfold. Several squads of National Guardsmen armed with M-1 rifles and tear gas and wearing ominous looking gas masks pushed the crowd backwards to force them to disperse. The crowd was moved over the hill which overlooked the Commons and onto the lawn and parking lot adjacent to the Architecture Building. An interesting standoff developed for approximately 30 minutes as the guardsmen stationed themselves about 50 yards from the demonstrators firing tear gas and ordering that the crowd disperse. It was a fluid group of onlookers since students and staff used this pathway to move from classroom buildings to residence halls and their contiguous dining facilities.

At approximately the top of the hour, a time when classes were changing, and hundreds of additional individuals were thrust upon the scene, the Guard began to make its way across the soccer field and up the hill to the front of the Architecture Building. Upon arriving at their destination, the Guard turned in unison, some members knelt, and fired sporadically into the crowd in the parking lot which was more than 50 yards away.

At first, it appeared as though the muffled sound was some cruel hoax, yet the glass breaking in dormitory windows to the rear and the cries and screams of victims to the right, was clear testimony that, in fact, an American tragedy was certainly taking place. Four students died on the fourth day of May, 1970, and a number were wounded, several seriously. Had it not been

for the fact that some guardsmen directed their fire into the sky, the tragedy could have been that much greater.

Every year at this time those who were involved in the debacle in Northeast Ohio, whether directly or indirectly, will never forget the shock and horror which took place on that incredible day in May. The shootings at Kent State preceded a similar tragedy at Jackson State in Mississippi and more than two years of the most sustained unrest in the history of American higher education. The Vietnam War did come to an unceremonious conclusion in 1973. Yet the symbol of Kent State shall be etched forever in the minds and hearts of a generation of Americans.

What meaning does this incident have for the past as well as for the present and future? Kent State was only a symbol of many issues which have crowded our collective milieu since 1970. The Kent State tragedy was not primarily about the Vietnam War, for that unfortunate experience merely provided the general context. It wasn't necessarily about the war between the generations since 19-year-old guardsmen stood in confrontation with rock throwing students. And it was not necessarily about the conflict between race or social class because participants had too many similarities. Even more ironic is that the town leaders and businessmen in Kent, Ohio, through their demands for protection, indirectly, at least, brought in the National Guard. At the same time, they relied on student customers for their economic wellbeing. What this was all about was a little of all those issues which we deal with today: unfulfilled promises by those in positions of power and by the "American Dream;" politics which can be too far right or too far left; an absence of leadership and the demise of heroes; and the continued lack of using concepts of morality in the decision-making process whether in the political, economic or social realm.

What happened at Kent State was a consequence of competing mistakes, some politically motivated, others economic, and yet in the final analysis it remains a moral issue. Did the events which took place in that sleepy little town of Middle America justify the actions which were taken and the use of force? So it is that Kent State is a moral dilemma, as it is with the "me" and "X" generations, crime, poverty, welfare, health care, and the human suffering in Bosnia. Until we as a nation begin to conceive of these issues in terms of right and wrong, we will continue to struggle with major agendas and find it difficult to reach solutions.

If there are lessons to be learned for higher education professionals, they could include the following principles. Leadership on college and university campuses must not be absent in times of crisis. When this occurs as in the case of Kent State, alternate leaders emerge who may be uninformed of the larger context surrounding each event. This was never so evident as in the Kent State case when at a critical moment on the morning of May 4, 1970, University President Robert White relinquished a major decision to the National Guard who in turn proceeded to forcibly thwart the inevitable rally scheduled for noon in the Commons (United States President's Commission on Campus Unrest, 1970).

Other lessons to keep in mind include not overreacting to incidents which are symptomatic of existing problems, yet do not represent conscious or organized behavior. Closing the bars on May 1 and calling in the National Guard are cases in point. Keep in mind that violence on a significant scale can occur anywhere such as it did on a largely conservative, apolitical campus in Northeast Ohio. During periods of campus unrest, proactive approaches are required, communication is important, and presidential leadership is critical. Finally, it should be noted that college campuses are microcosms of society reflecting at times, the best and worst of current trends. Student affairs professionals play a key role in recognizing these trends and facilitating communication and the decision-making process.

During the four days of May at Kent State, the student affairs staff worked tenaciously to minimize illegal activity and to bring discussion and sanity to the tumultuous events taking place. They even sensed the impending danger and called for the Campus to close on May 4. Staff was left powerless in the wake of a circumstantial juggernaut which overwhelmed reason and civility. This was a clear example of the importance of communication which is essential, especially in times of crisis, and the need to have access to the highest levels of decision making to ensure the integrity of the academic community.

The fact that Kent State University experienced two additional years of serious campus unrest after May 1970, and survived without serious injury or loss of life is testimony to the effectiveness of the suggestions offered herein. Communication at all levels including the chief executive officer is imperative as well as constantly reminding ourselves to listen, hear, and respond appropriately to what students are saying.

Reference

United States President's Commission on Campus Unrest. (1970). *The Report of the President's Commission on Campus Unrest*. New York, NY: Arno.

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